



Photographs by STEFANO PALTERA For The Times

A LOFT VIBE: Chef Andy Brooks chats with guests at his restaurant, which boasts West Coast wines as well as signature martinis.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A presence in the present

A smart Ventura eatery has ideas and the skills to back them up.

By S. IRENE VIRBILA
Times Staff Writer

WITH his shaved head, pencil stuck behind one ear and an apron that's seen some serious kitchen combat, Andy Brooks certainly looks the part. He talks like a chef too, if the savvy contemporary American menu for his new Ventura restaurant is any indication. Brooks' résumé is a serious read: He's been chef de cuisine, executive sous-chef and chef for — not necessarily in this order — Jeff Tunks at DC Coast in Washington, D.C.; Bradley Ogden at Lark Creek Cafe in the San Francisco Bay Area; and Carrie Nahabedian (former executive chef of the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills) at Naha in Chicago.

None of that would mean much if Mr. Brooks couldn't also cook like a chef. But at Brooks, which opened several months ago in the former Ruby's Mexican restaurant on East Thomp-



SERVING: Brooks' 24-hour marinated short ribs.

son Boulevard, he's turning out chilled yellow tomato gazpacho, limoncello-steamed mussels with lemon thyme cream and rock shrimp risotto with ruby grapefruit.

The restaurant is a first for Brooks and his wife, Jayme, and a first for Ventura, which has never had a restaurant so cut to the moment as this one. For a chef who's worked in big cities almost his entire career, Ventura is a smart move, as smart as Christian Schaffer (Chloe, Avenue) moving to Ojai.

Brooks and designer Tom Nahabedian of Chicago have given the space a loft vibe with high ceilings and industrial materials. And the bar in the middle of the restaurant already has its regulars hanging for tastes of Central Coast wines. The wine list is

Brooks

Where: 545 E. Thompson Blvd., Ventura

When: 5 to 9:30 p.m. Tuesdays to Thursdays, 5 to 10:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 5 to 9:30 p.m. Sundays. Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays to Fridays

Price: Starters, \$7 to \$14; main courses, \$20 to \$36; sides, \$5; chef's five-course tasting menu, \$55. Lunch starters, \$5 to \$11; main courses, \$12 to \$18

Info: (805) 652-7070, www.restaurantbrooks.com

made up of West Coast labels, including a couple of Brooks private label bottlings. But if you prefer a cocktail, the bartender has some signature martinis up his sleeve, such as a Woody Martini — which is Johnny Walker Red with Absolut Citron, vermouth and a twist of lemon — or a Citrus Martini made with Absolut Mandarin, fresh orange juice and a splash of Cointreau.

The menu at this new restaurant isn't written in stone. Brooks and sous-chef Shawn Williams have too many ideas to restrict themselves to a fixed menu. Right now, warm Mexican

lobster *sopa* made with masa dough, lobster, chile, lime and a scoop of guacamole makes a delicious starter. The kitchen also does a good job with cornmeal fried oysters served with refreshing fennel celery root slaw.

Main courses include day boat scallops seared in a cast-iron pan and accompanied by a cactus relish. Or a big-boy pork chop with garlic green beans and roasted red potato salad. Bone-in prime rib-eye tempts with creamy Anson Mills jalapeño cheese grits and sautéed rapini. Prices are moderate; only that rib-eye breaks the \$30 mark. And portions are not exactly dainty.

You can order those grits on the side too, along with a handful of others that show the chef's penchant for veggies. He's got olive oil parsnip purée and sautéed collard greens, enough to make dining here an interesting proposition for vegetarians.

On Fridays and Saturdays the restaurant features live music starting at 9 p.m. from the Davey Miller Jazz Trio, which should liven up the place considerably. Now, instead of rushing back from the beach, there's a new option — stop in for dinner and a spot of live music at this promising newcomer.

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